The Origins of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University

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On October 31, 1754, George II, King of England, issued the following proclamation:

> By the grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, etc. . . . Know ye, that Wee, considering the premises, do of our special Grace, Certain Knowledge, and mere motion, by these presents, will, Grant, Constitute, and ordain that there be erected and made on the said Lands, a College, and other Buildings and improvements, for the use and conveniency of the same, which shall be called and Known by the name of Kings College, for the instruction and Education of Youth in the Learned Languages, and Liberal Arts and Sciences.

So began a new venture in medical education in the colony of New York. King's College was located near Trinity Church (Fig. 1).

At this time medical education in the colonies was usually an apprenticeship; only a very few physicians received education in Europe. Quacks, charlatans, and impostors abounded. Dr. James Jay, older brother of John Jay, (a King's College graduate, later President of the Continental Congress, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, contributor to *The*

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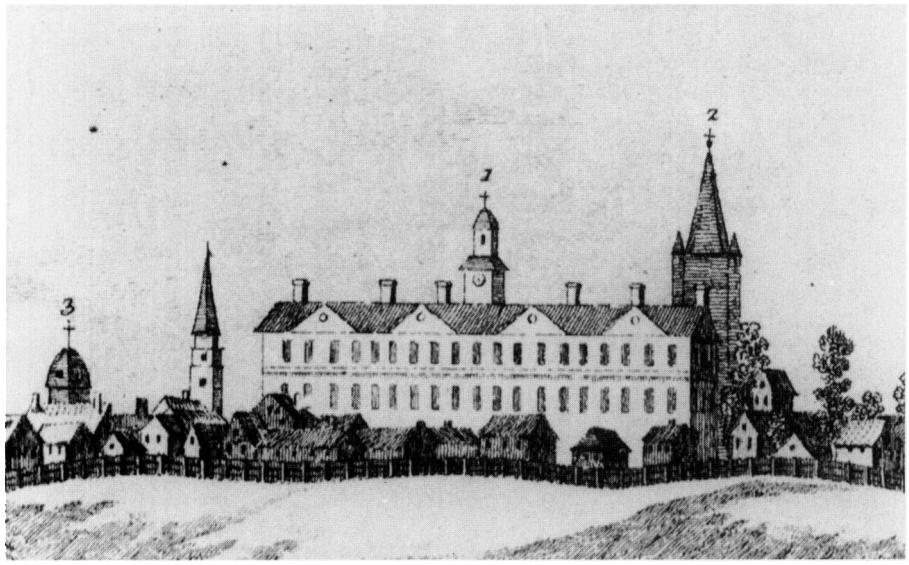

FIG. 1. King's College, near Trinity Church, Manhattan, 1763.

Federalist, and an author of the treaty ending the War of Independence) was appalled by the abuses committed in the name of medicine and was interested in the development of a medical school to thus raise King's College to the status of a University and provide quality medical education and standards for the profession. He left his practice, went to London to raise money for the school, and was successful enough to be knighted for his efforts on behalf of education in New York. (A scandal arose when he was unable to deliver the full sum of the money raised, so he stayed in London, setting up practice there.) The proposal for a medical school, initiated in 1763, met with some hostility because of a lack of funds, the disfavor under which the medical profession had fallen, and opposition to the idea of a medical school affiliated with King's College, which was controlled by the Church of England, at a time when England was becoming increasingly oppressive, demanding more and more in taxes from the colonies. During the Revolution, Sir James Jay himself, by prearrangement, was captured by the British as a "spy," and allowed to emigrate to England.

Eventually, continuing entreaties to the governors of King's

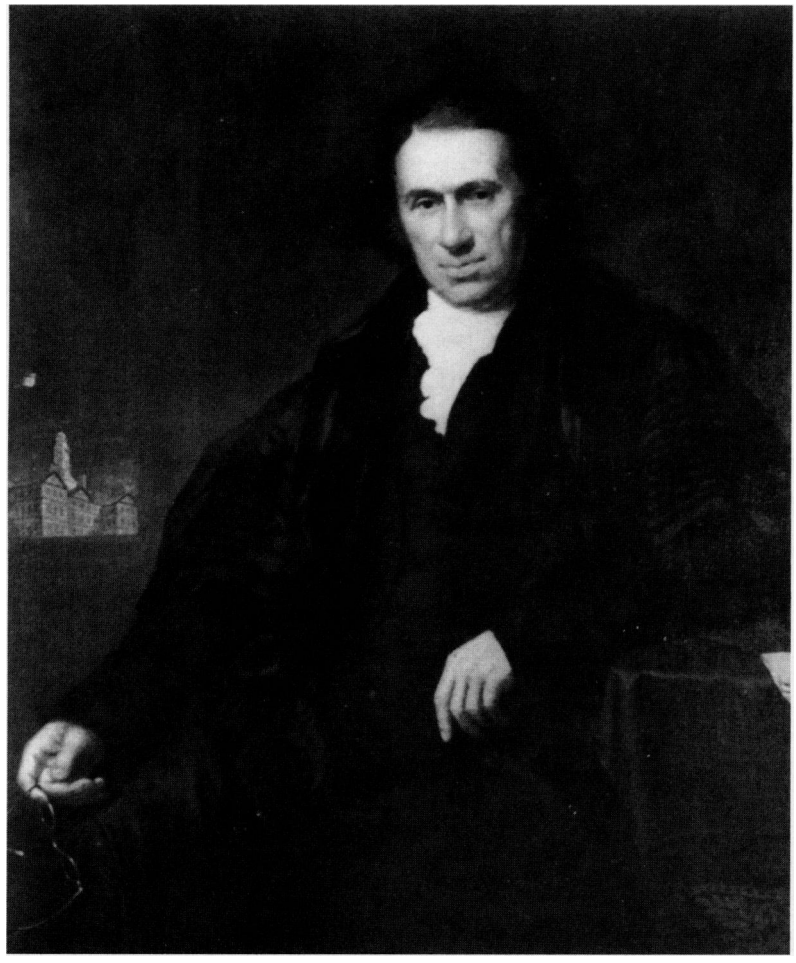

FIG. 2. Dr. Samuel Bard.

College resulted in the establishment of a medical school, which opened in 1767 with a faculty of six professors. The first two Doctor of Medicine degrees in the colonies were conferred on Robert Tucker in 1770 and Samuel Kissam in 1771 (the first in a line of 19 Kissams who went on to attend the College of Physicians and Surgeons).

Samuel Bard (Fig. 2), who attended medical school at the University of Edinburgh, was one of the initial faculty members at the new medical school. He, along with his co-professors, established admission requirements and a rigorous curriculum under a

full complement of professors, based on European models. At the school's first commencement, in 1769, Samuel Bard argued passionately for the founding of a hospital in New York. Not long thereafter, a royal charter from King George III authorized construction of the New York Hospital; the cornerstone was laid in 1773.

In 1776, the entire population of the colonies became polarized between patriots and loyalists. King's College, a hotbed of Toryism that bore an unfavored name, closed; the faculty and students dispersed and equipment and specimens were dismantled or destroyed. Of the six faculty, some were loyalists and some were patriots; Dr. Bard sat delicately on the fence. Twenty-thousand troops under General Washington came to defend New York; the Committee on Safety, and later, the soldiers, occupied the buildings of King's College. Entrenchments, batteries, and barricades were erected throughout the city; the effort was to no avail, as General Washington and his troops lost the brief battles of Long Island and New York and the British occupied the city until 1783.

During this time, the city was devastated by fires and the population shrank to half its pre-war size. In 1784, King's College was reopened under a new name—Columbia College—and Dr. Bard was appointed to the medical faculty, but not to its most prestigious post, perhaps because of his British sympathies during the Revolution. The most important chair, Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine, went to Nicholas Romayne, also a graduate of the medical school at Edinburgh and one destined to carry on a tumultuous rivalry with Bard (Fig. 3). There was considerable friction amongst the faculty within the new school, some of it concerning the remuneration of private instruction, and in 1787, Romayne resigned to form his own medical school, located at Beekman and Nassau Streets. Other faculty members resigned and the school effectively closed.

At this time, students had to obtain their own cadavers for dissection and grave robbing was a common practice for medical students and doctors alike. There was increasing public outcry over the activities of these "resurrectionists," culminating in "the

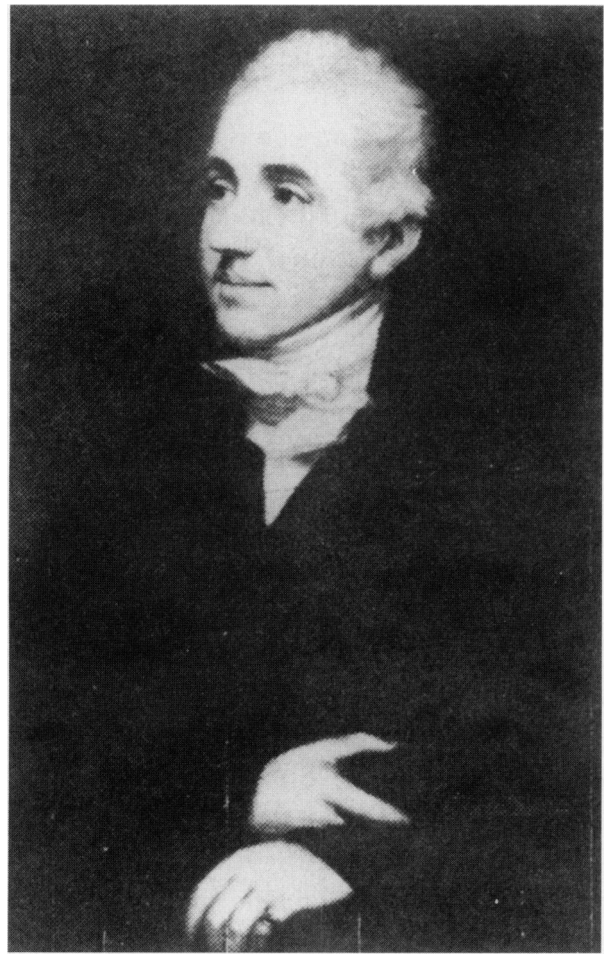

FIG. 3. Dr. Nicholas Romayne.

Doctors' Riot" of 1788, in which a number of the doctors were imprisoned—in part to placate the mob but mainly for their own protection. The rioters ransacked New York Hospital, which was located near the present City Hall, and surged southward toward the southern tip of Manhattan, breaking into and pilfering the homes of physicians along the way. The mob made its way to the site of Columbia College, where Alexander Hamilton (King's College graduate, aide-de-camp of Washington, an author of *The Federalist*, and first Secretary of the Treasury) tried without success to stop the rioters from entering the facility in their frenzy to

discover anatomical specimens and destroy scientific objects. When the rioters surged by Dr. Bard's house, he welcomed them with open doors; they passed by, however, believing that he had nothing to hide. John Jay, Baron von Steuben (Revolutionary War hero from Germany who was Washington's drillmaster), Mayor Duane, and Governor Clinton all went north on Broadway to the jail, to try to stem the riot. John Jay was rendered unconscious when struck in the head by a rock, as was Baron von Steuben. The militia opened fire on the rioters and a number of people were killed. Order was eventually restored, grand jury indictments and convictions handed out, and a new law was passed to prevent grave robbing.

After the riot, the leading physicians in the city formed the first Medical Society of the State of New York under the presidency of Samuel Bard's father, Dr. John Bard. Meanwhile, Dr. Nicholas Romayne's rival medical school had become more popular than Columbia's. Incredibly, he continued as a trustee of Columbia College and was still a lecturer at its medical school! His faculty staffed the almshouse and prison where students could receive clinical training, but New York Hospital was soon to begin to receive patients and Romayne's rival, Samuel Bard, was to be the chief attending physician. Sensing the incipient resurgence of Columbia's medical school, Romayne petitioned the Regents of the State of New York to sanction his medical school. Despite opposition from the Medical Society and knowing full well there was no need for two medical schools in the city, the regents approved Romayne's proposal and the legislature enabled the establishment of a "College of Physicians and Surgeons."

The Bards vehemently opposed this new medical school and they were a force to be reckoned with. Physicians to George Washington, politically and socially astute and well-connected, educational and civic leaders of New York, their influence prevailed. That summer a yellow fever epidemic hit New York; panic gripped the city and politics were forgotten, giving the Bards time to organize their opposition to the new school. A reorganization of the Columbia Medical School was proposed with the newly

opened New York Hospital as the center for clinical teaching. Romayne's proposed charter was postponed; therefore, although his school had many students, they could not be granted the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Thus thwarted, Romayne resigned his Columbia posts and allied his medical school with Queen's College (soon to become Rutgers though still in New York). Eventually, Queen's College suffered financial hardships and closed; Romayne shut down his school and sailed for London.

In 1797, Romayne, back from England, was charged, together with Senator William Blount of Tennessee, with "high crimes and misdemeanors" for their roles in a plan to prevent the transfer of Louisiana and Florida from Spanish to French control. The conspiracy involved the British, western frontiersmen and Indians, and Romayne stood to benefit from land speculation and potential political appointment. President John Adams became aware of this plot and requested the Congress to investigate. Blount was eventually impeached and Romayne was imprisoned and then allowed to sail back to England.

Romayne returned to New York at the beginning of the new century and his prospects appeared to be brighter. Bard had resigned from New York Hospital in 1797 and had retired to his farm at Hyde Park. He continued as Dean of Columbia's medical school until 1804, but fewer and fewer students attended and the school was foundering. In 1806 the ever-resourceful Romayne was elected first President of the New York Medical Society; thereafter, he petitioned the State Regents to allow all members of the Medical Society to become incorporated as faculty into a College of Physicians and Surgeons. This plea was granted and in 1807, the College was established and Romayne was elected president. The site chosen for the new medical school was located on Robinson Street—several doorsteps from the foundering, rival Columbia school of medicine.

One of Romayne's supporters in the establishment of the College of Physicians and Surgeons was David Hosack, a prominent physician on the faculty of Columbia's medical school who now held appointments at both rival schools (Fig. 4). He was the

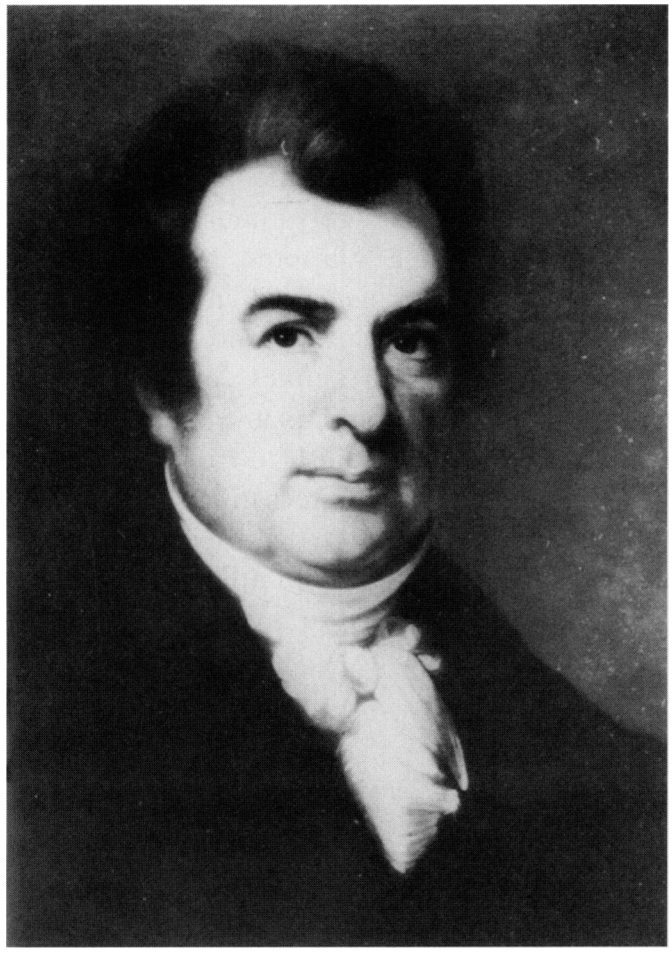

FIG. 4. Dr. David Hosack.

attending physician for Alexander Hamilton when he was mortally wounded in his duel with Aaron Burr, and was a socially prominent individual with many influential friends. He purchased a farm 5 miles north of the medical school; he used the farm to grow botanicals for the edification of medical students regarding various "materia medica." He named it the Elgin Gardens after his father's home in Scotland. The greenhouses and farm equipment were expensive to maintain, however, and he eventually sold the land to the State of New York for $75,000. The state, in the early 1800s, could not care for the property and donated it to the newly

founded College of Physicians and Surgeons. The College of Physicians and Surgeons, likewise, could not maintain the property and gave it to Columbia College. Eventually, as the city moved northward, this area became inhabited and, after the Civil War, became a prestigious neighborhood. In the 1920s, the Metropolitan Opera Company, searching for a new venue, selected this site. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was asked to help finance the venture and he became interested in the possibilities of a colossal cultural and commercial urban development at this location. The Great Depression began and the Metropolitan Opera Company lost interest in the project because of its financial magnitude. Rockefeller's interest did not waver, however, and he pursued the project, constructing an architecturally harmonious "city within a city"—Rockefeller Center. In the 1970s, the lease of the land provided $11,000,000 a year for Columbia University; in 1985, the property was sold by Columbia to the Rockefeller Foundation for $400,000,000.

The man who began this chain of events, David Hosack, was a junior partner in Dr. Bard's office and did not feel he was sufficiently rewarded by Romayne for his help in establishing the College of Physicians and Surgeons; he therefore resigned from the faculty of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1808 but continued as a trustee. In 1811, he also resigned from the faculty of Columbia's medical school, having been a disruptive element at both schools. Hosack then began to maneuver to have the two schools merge; he was successful in having Romayne deposed, to be replaced as president by none other than the retired Dr. Samuel Bard! Thus, paradoxically, the man who opposed the establishment of the College of Physicians and Surgeons was made its head and the man who founded the school was ousted.

Romayne was not to be counted out. With several of his colleagues who had helped finance the founding of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, he removed all of the equipment in the school, carting it to a new location and opened a new medical school, which immediately attracted the largest student body in the City! Now there were three medical schools within six blocks

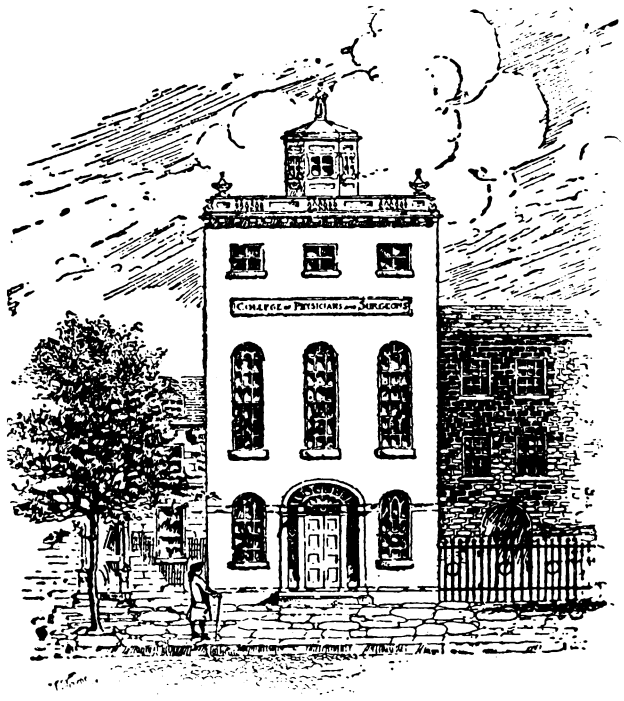

FIG. 5. College of Physicians & Surgeons, on Barclay Street, 1813.

of one another, in a city of 100,000 inhabitants. Once again Queen's College was appealed to for acceptance of Romayne's school as its medical department and in 1812 it did so. In 1813 the two smaller and failing schools, Columbia and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, finally decided to merge faculty and move to a new site on Barclay Street (Fig. 5), thereby becoming the strongest medical school in the city. Romayne appealed to the Regents to charter his school and allow the conferring of the Doctor of Medicine degree, but he was refused and his school was forced to close. Defeated for the final time, the man who did the most to found the College of Physicians and Surgeons died in 1817 without commemoration or public notice.

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